DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 086 998 CS 200 963

AUTHOR Livingston, James T.
TITLE Derek Walcott: Poet of the New World.
PUB DATE Nov 71
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (61st, Las Vegas, Nov 25-27, 1971)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Composition (Literary); Creative Writing; *Literary Criticism; *Literary Influences; Literary Styles; Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; *Poets; Satire; Symbols (Literary)
IDENTIFIERS Caribbean; *Walcott (Derek)

ABSTRACT

Derek Walcott is the major voice of the Caribbean naissance. His strength lies in the creative tension between the particularity of his Caribbean setting and the universalities of his theme and style. His stylistic influences and allusions resemble those of Donne, Marvell, Yeats, Hopkins, Pound, Ransom, Spender, Lowell, and Graves. Passages of his poetry resemble Eliot's "Prufrock" in parody, Thomas in tone, and Auden in satire. The constellation of thematic polarities is responsible for much of the creative power in the poems of Walcott. Fundamental to all of them is Walcott's understanding of the difference between the poles of the New World and the Old. Isolation is the most prominent of Walcott's themes, the isolation of the individual in the modern world, the isolation of the Caribbean from the world's centers of culture and power, and finally the isolation from history that is inherent in the New World poet and his bitter optimism. (LL)

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James T. Livingston
Professor and Chairman
Department of English
Drury College
Springfield, Missouri 65802

National Council of Teachers of English
61st Annual Meeting, Las Vegas
Perspectives I, 9-10:30 A. M., November 26, 1971, "Contemporary Literature from Africa and the Caribbean"

DEREK WALCOTT: POET OF THE NEW WORLD

When it comes to delineating the texts which make up the literary canon of the day, critics and teachers are sometimes capable of being as notoriously provincial as the stereotype of the American middle class. Many minds boggle slightly, for example, at the notion of a significant literature of the Caribbean. The images which we associate with those exotic islands are altogether frivolous - beautiful people frolicking on uncrowded beaches, posh hotels, colorful nightclubs, the luxury cruise ship standing in an emerald bay. There are natives there, of course, but they are primitives, superstitious, lolling through their days in tropic torper, existing primarily as background for our romantic vacations. For those with more social and political consciousness, the Caribbean is remembered to have been the scene of several riots and other incidents in recent years, arising from widespread social unrest over the failure of political independence to provide a naively expected prosperity. The rise of Black Nationalism in these islands has served as an informing point of contrast and comparison with the Black Power movement in the United States. What has remained largely "Undiscovered" by us, however, is an astonishing West Indian cultural and literary naissance during the past twenty-five years.

It is not my purpose to define the scope and dimensions of this literary outpouring. Suffice it to say that in the poems and novels of George Lamming and Edward Brathwaite of Barbados, Samuel Selvon and V. S. Naipaul of Trinidad, Roger Mais and Andrew Salkey of Jamaica, and Wilson Harris and Martin Carter of Guyana, among many others, there awaits an exciting frontier for the

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venturesome. Henry Swanzy, the British critic, gave immeasurable impetus to this literature through his BBC program "Caribbean Voices" from 1946 to 1955. His reading aloud of poems and stories, coupled with careful criticism, gave badly needed recognition and encouragement to writers struggling against the "malarial ennervation"[1] of their colonial status. Almost ten years ago Swanzy listed the crucial ingredients which made the West Indies, of all the English-speaking world

> the place most suited for maintenance of a literary tradition. For real maintenance relies upon real development and to that almost every important factor in the Caribbean conspires...the new social need for self-consciousness, which politically takes the form of Nationalism... the special need to communicate provided by small islands...the racial stock of a potential writer is one of the richest in the world, providing wonderful chances of cross-fertilization...the self-realization of a people through the acceptance and sublimation of the facts of slavery and the colour bar are the grand theme for tragedy and eventual triumph. There is all the colour...of a rich peasant life. And...there is reverance for the word, preserved in a society still largely illiterate....[2]

It is within this context, then, that one may begin to speak of a contemporary literature of the New World. However one may feel about the current state of letters in the United States, it is certainly difficult to construe our presently emerging literature as the expression of a New World sensibility. We have lived through too much in the past century and have been made old and tired by it. All the more reason, then, to awaken to a unique and powerful poetic presence stranded in the gulf to our south.

By wide consensus the major voice of the Caribbean naissance thus far is that of Derek Walcott. Witness Chad Walsh in a recent review:

> In my avocation as a reviewer, I have learned to be chary of literary prophecies, but this time I will take my chances. I am convinced Derek Walcott is already one of the half-dozen most important poets now writing in English. He may prove to be <u>the</u> best.[3]

As long ago as 1962 Robert Graves observed that Walcott "handles English with a closer understanding of its inner magic than most (if not any) of his English-born contemporaries."[4] Seldon Rodman, writing in the <u>New York Times</u> affirms:

> Aficionados of Caribbean writing have been aware for some time that Derek Walcott is the first considerable English-speaking poet to emerge from the bonewhite Arcadia of the old slavocracies. Now, with the publication of his fourth book of verse, (The Gulf)Walcott's stature in the front rank of all contemporary poets using English should be apparent.[5]

Part of Mr. Walcott's strength doubtless lies in the creative tension between the particularity of his Caribbean setting and the universalities of his themes and style. If the fact that he is a West Indian has rendered him an isolate from the literary establishments of London and New York, it has at the same time served him well as a point of aesthetic distance. Like the great nineteenth century Russian writers or, more recently, Boris Pasternak (for whom he feels a great affinity), Walcott has gained an enormous advantage from his position of being within, but not quite of, the central cultural tradition of his time. From his "hammock swung between Americas"[6] he has been able to see more calmly and clearly and recreate more forcefully the complex realities of our agonized age, meanwhile finding within "the maze of Modernism" as Geoffrey Hartman has called it,[7] his distinctive poetic voice which serves both to extend the tradition and to complicate it.

In understanding Walcott's style, it is helpful to remember Janheinz Jahn's argument that Negritude, the literary movement begun in Paris in 1934 by Senghor and Cesaire, should be seen as the successful revolt of Caliban, the colonial, whereby he broke out of the language prison of Prospero, the imperialist, "by converting that language to his own needs for self-expression." According to Jahn, "the greatest achievement of Negritude /was/ that a genuine African feeling for life, and attitude to life, could be and was expressed in a European language."[8]

Walcott's power as a New World poet lies in a comparable achievement. When he began to write, there was no West Indian literature. As he said, "If there was nothing, there was everything to be made. With this prodigious

ambition one began."[9] What was given was "this English tongue I love." The overwhelming motivation was to master it. As Walcott said,

> We recognized illiteracy for what it was, a defect, not the attribute it is now considered to be by revolutionaries. Language was earned, there was no self-contempt, no vision of revenge. Thus for the young poet..., there was no other motivation but knowledge."[10]

Commentators on Walcott's early poems (his first volume was published when he was only eighteen years old), though astonished at the precocity of his verbal pyrotechnics, were almost uniformly distressed by his imitativeness. But from our perspective it is clear that Walcott's growth as a poet involved a systematic experimentation with the major lyric styles of the English tradition. In his first important collection, In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960, there are echoes, as R. J. Owens complained, "of almost everyone."[11] But in the first poem of that book, Walcott declares his intentions by assuming the voice of Eliot's Prufrock in brilliant parody and self-mockery:

> And my life, too early of course for the profound cigarette,
> The turned doorhandle, the knife turning
> In the bowels of the hours, must not be made public
> Until I have learnt to suffer
> In accurate iambics.
>
> I go, of course, through all the isolated acts,
> Make a holiday of situations,
> Straighten my tie and fix important jaws,
> And note the living images
> Of flesh that saunter through the eye.[12]

Again and again Walcott displays his mastery of various idioms. In his poem about the great fire which virtually destroyed his home town of Castries on the island of St. Lucia, he sings in the vibrant tones of Dylan Thomas:

> All day I walked abroad among the rubbled tales.
> Shocked at each wall that stood on the street like a liar,
> Loud was the bird-rocked sky, and all the clouds were bales
> Torn open by looting and white in spite of the fire;[13]

Or he can create (in a poem called "A Country Club Romance") "the astringent lyricism"[14] of W. H. Auden's satire:

Laburnum-bright her hair
Her eyes were blue as ponds,
Her thighs, so tanned and bare,
Sounder than Government bonds...[15]

In addition Walcott explored the "jump and jive" of the native West Indian speech:

Poopa, da' was a fete. I mean it had
Free rum free whisky and some fellars beating
Pan from one of them band in Trinidad
And everywhere you turn was people eating
And drinking and don't name me but I think
They catch his wife with two tests up the beach
While he drunk quoting Shelley with "Each
Generation has its angst, but we has none"
And wouldn't let a comma in edgewise.
(Black writer chap, one of them Oxbridge guys.)[16]

With a conscious rejection of mere originality, Walcott learned his craft, drawing upon all the strands of his heritage and seizing every possibility. Donne, Marvell, Yeats, Hopkins, Pound, Ransom, Spender, Lowell, Graves, they are all there, and more, as stylistic influences or through allusion. Paradoxically, in the mature Walcott an authentically original voice has emerged.

In one of the final poems of In a Green Night Walcott declares

...I seek
As climate seeks its style, to write
Verse crisp as sand, clear as sunlight,
Cold as the curled wave, ordinary
As a tumbler of island water;[17]

The idea is echoed in lines from the title poem of his most recent book, The Gulf:

All styles yearn to be plain
As life.[18]

Or again in this passage from "Nearing Forty" in the same volume:

...your life bled for
the household truth, the style past metaphor
that finds its parallel however wretched
in simple, shining lines, in pages stretched
plain as a bleaching bedsheet under a guttering rainspout, glad for the sputter

> of occasional insight; you who foresaw
> ambition as a searing meteor
> will fumble a damp match, and smiling, settle
> for the dry wheezing of a dented kettle,
> for vision narrower than a louvre's gap...[19]

The vision is narrower only in the sense that it is grounded in greater concreteness. No doubt, Walcott's style has developed in the general direction of increased clarity and simplicity. The meters are tightly controlled; the lines closely packed, primarily by a verbal richness, an imaginative use of vocabulary that has always been Walcott's special gift. Often the language is colloquial, occasionally even dialect, but always it is dense and resonant with a fullness of sense which matches the fullness of sound. "Elizabethan" is the description which has come to mind in many of his readers.

It is characteristic of Walcott's New World sensibility that his style is difficult to categorize. His range remains enormous, but it is a range of emotion and tone, as well as theme, rather than a range of imitative voices. The "style past metaphor" for which the poet strives is a New World style, governed always by a quality of elation, a staggering, refreshing elation in possibility, the possibility of a man and his language waking to wonder in a world that is truly new. It is, perhaps, as mystery that the world is ultimately seen, but the prerequisite for this vision is wonder.[20] What finally constitutes Walcott's proper claim to the New World, what finally delivers him from colonial servitude into independent consciousness is the forging of a language that goes beyond mimicry to an elemental naming of things with epiphanic power. And what in large measure this entails, as Walcott himself has said, is "not new names for old things, or old names for old things, but the faith of using the old names anew."[21] For such faith, surely wonder, again, is a prerequisite.

To speak of faith is to move from style to theme. A remarkable constellation of thematic polarities lies at the heart of Walcott's poems and is doubtless responsible for much of their creative power; Black and white, slave and master, poverty and plenty, skeptism and faith, knowledge and innocence, history and myth. Fundamental to them all is Walcott's understanding of the difference between the poles of the New World and the Old. The anguish of the New World, its existence in irony, the bitterness of its inheritance of great traditions lies in the suspicion that the New World can never after all be paradisal. The New World becomes the Old World when it concludes that it is condemned to repeat the fate of the Old World. Its despair is to accept the view of history as original sin. Walcott rejects this pessimism, as do Whitman and Neruda, two of the greatest poets of the New World. Their view of the New World is Adamic. In their enormous charity man is not culpable but capable of wonder in his second chance of Eden, an Eden he himself must make, must will, not in innocence but from experience of the Old. For Walcott the true literature of the New World is shaped by a bitter optimism. It is an optimism, a joy which springs from wonder at elemental man in a world without ruins, and a bitterness which remembers his tireless stupidity. To be a poet in the New World is to wrestle with such mighty opposites.[22] Just as Walcott managed stylistically to break his early bondage to the forms of his poetic masters and sieze the freedom to recreate the world by the light of his personal vision, so must the New World poet break from any servitude to the muse of history, for that service leads only to bitterness, recrimination, imitation, and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendents of slaves, or a literature of remorse written by the descendents of their masters.[23]

This "bitter optimism" of the New World poet is rendered by Walcott in many different ways. Three examples from his most recent collection of poems can illustrate. The first is entitled "Blues" and is written in an informal conversational tone which provides a startling contrast to the verbal richness of most of Walcott's work. It is notable, too, for its touch of humor, whereby its terrifying subject matter -- being beaten up in Greenwich Village because he is not black enough -- is kept from being self-pitying. The note of innocence is emphasized in the opening stanza, not only as it characterizes the lyric voice and his light skin, but more crucially through the light imagery which is subtly modulated into a festival atmosphere and then again into a "saint's" day.

> Those five or six young guys
> hunched on the stoop
> that oven-hot summer night
> whistled me over. Nice
> and friendly. So, I step.
> MacDougal or Christopher
> Street in chains of light.
>
> A summer festival. Or some
> saint's. I wasn't too far from
> home, but not too bright
> for a nigger, and not too dark.
> I figured we were all
> one, wop, nigger, jew,
> besides, this wasn't Central Park.
> I'm coming on too strong? You figure
> right! They beat this yellow nigger
> black and blue.

The transition to the fight is abrupt, and the fear and pain are vividly portrayed in the next two stanzas, but concluding each stanza are the simple, incontrovertible terms by which one endures:

> I did nothing. They fought
> each other, really. Life
> gives them a few kicks,
> that's all. The spades, the spicks.

And:

> It's nothing really.
> They won't get enough love.

The final stanza summarizes the rich blend of pain, concrete fact, moral ambivalence, and comic (human) sufferance which is the blues:

> You know they wouldn't kill
> you. Just playing rough,
> like young America will.
> Still, it taught me something
> about love. If it's so tough,
> forget it.[24]

A more muted form of testimony to the spirit of bitter optimism is found in a vignette called "Washington." With powerful irony he captures the contradictions of the city, capsuling "the earnest, tilted face of President Johnson/wincing with concern" and "our child's wish for the moon," in preparation for a devastating finale which merges the poet's wonder at the beauties of the city in autumn (rather than the cherry-blossom spring one might expect) with the martyrs of the Viet Nam war:

> while bombs of sumac burst below my window
> and the live oaks catch fire,
> and saffron beeches, gay
> as a Buddhist's robes,
> charred,
> drop their rags, naked.[25]

Walcott's acute sensitivity to the moral significance of place and landscape enable him here, as in most of his poems about the Caribbean setting, to create "significant form" in the most radical sense. The physical and elemental is named and endowed with meaning; form emerges from the integration of image, emotion, and thought. It is the form of all great poetry, resonant but controlled, brilliantly metaphoric but stunningly concrete.

A final example is afforded us in "Crusoe's Journal," one of the most personal of Walcott's poems. Set in the beach house on the north east coast of Trinidad, where he does most of his writing, the poem is a complex meditation by the poet upon his life's work. An epigraph from Robinson Crusoe establishes the theme:

> I looked now upon the world as a thing remote, which I had nothing to do with, no expectation from, and, indeed no desires about. In a word, I had nothing indeed to do with it, now was ever like to have; so I thought it looked as we may perhaps look upon it hereafter, viz., as a place I had lived in but was come out of it; and well might I say, as Father Abraham to Dives, 'Between me and thee is a great gulf fixed.'

Isolation is the most prominent of Walcott's themes, the isolation of the individual in the modern world, the isolation of the Caribbean from the world's centers of culture and power, and finally the isolation from history that is inherent to the New World poet and his bitter optimism. And from this isolation and deprivation, the poet tells us

> came our first book, our profane Genesis
> whose Adam speaks that prose
> which, blessing some sea-rock, startles itself
> with poetry's surprise,
> in a green world, one without metaphors...[26]

Though it is a lonely world, Walcott at last accepts the isolation of his archipelago, for there he can learn to shape "where nothing was/ the language of a race."[27] The poem concludes with an invitation to the wonder of the New World:

> ...all of us
> yearn for those fantasies
> of innocence, for our faith's arrested phase
> when the clear voice
> startled itself saying 'water, heaven, Christ,'
> hoarding such heresies as
> God's loneliness moves in His smallest creatures.[28]

NOTES

[1]Derek Walcott, "What the Twilight Says: An Overture," Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 4.

[2]Henry Swanzy, "Prolegomena to a West Indian Culture," Caribbean Quarterly VIII (December, 1962), p. 121.

[3]Chad Walsh, "A Life of Contradictions, a Poetry of Unities," Washington Post Book World, (December 13, 1970), p. 3.

[4]Quoted on the book jacket of Derek Walcott's Selected Poems (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1964).

[5]Seldon Rodman, Review of The Gulf, New York Times Book Review, (October 11, 1970), p. 24.

[6]Derek Walcott, "Elegy," The Gulf (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 63.

[7]Geoffrey Hartman, Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 258.

[8]Janheinz Jahn, Neo-African Literature: A History of Black Writing (New York, Grove Press, Inc., 1968), pp. 242-259.

[9]Derek Walcott, "A Far Cry From Africa", In A Green Night: Poems 1948-1960, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 18.

[10]Derek Walcott, "What the Twilight Says; An Overture," Dream on Monkey Mountain..., p. 11.

[11]R. J. Owens, "West Indian Poetry," Caribbean Quarterly VII, (December, 1961), p. 120.

[12]Derek Walcott, "Prelude," In a Green Night..., p. 11.

[13]Walcott, "A City's Death by Fire," ibid, p. 16.

[14]Cameron G. O. King and Louis James, "In a Solitude for Company: The Poetry Derek Walcott," The Islands In Between, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 87.

[15]Walcott, In a Green Night..., p. 31.

[16]Walcott, "Tales of the Islands, Chapter VI," In A Green Night..., p. 28.

[17]"Islands," ibid, p. 77.

[18]Walcott, The Gulf, p. 60.

[19]Ibid, p. 106.